

Anna Sokolow and Jose Limón Get Revived at BAC

By Deborah Jowitz Tuesday February 16 2010

Anna Sokolow was born to Russian immigrant parents on February 9, 100 years ago. By 1912, she was on her way to growing up tough and militant on New York's Lower East Side. If you were dancing in one of her works, you knew that when she said, "Turn your head," she meant, "TURN YOUR HEAD!" and you'd better do it with all the intensity you could muster.

Of all the dances by Sokolow that spoke of alienation, of solitude within a crowd, of urban restlessness, *Rooms* (1955) is surely the greatest. Each of the eight dancers in this Limón Dance Company revival at the Baryshnikov Arts Center (fastidiously staged and directed by Jim May, director of the Sokolow Theatre Dance Ensemble) begins seated on a chair in a small diamond of light, staring past us. The walls of these solitary rooms might as well be solid, yet they become porous in dreams. The spare, opening trumpet notes in Kenyon Hopkins's jazz score might be some musician neighbor practicing late at night (even though the Manhattan School of Music Jazz Ensemble and conductor Justin DiCioccio are visible behind the dancers).

At a time when modern dance was concerned with expressing emotion, Sokolow was brilliant at creating movements that are austere, yet seem wrenched from the performers' hearts. At one moment in the opening, the chair-bound performers—not all at the same time—stretch their legs out in front of them and rapidly paddle the air, while their bodies stay still and their faces expressionless; it's like a contagious panic attack that they don't fully acknowledge. In the section titled "Desire," when six chairs face one another in two lines, the seated performers—heads thrown back, both arms straining forward—slide their feet along the floor in a going-noplace walk to the accompanying stroll by the piano and percussion. In "Daydream," three women lean forward, stretch their arms to either side, and wiggle their fingers, turning their heads one way and another to watch what look like handfuls of worms.

The chairs, variously arranged, become imagined lovers for Kristen Foote, barricades to hide behind for the terrified Daniel Fetecua Soto, a place both refuge and jail while Ashley Lindsay dreams of freedom, the platform onto which the despairing Kathryn Alter climbs, perhaps to hang herself. Dante Puleio's chair is rarely a resting place in "Going." To a regulated frenzy by drummer Austin Walker, he punches the air with his hands, claps with the groove, jumps explosively. Running in place, he's going, but what destination is possible? These solos are all wonderful, and wonderfully performed.

It was a splendid idea on the part of the Limón company's artistic director, Carla Maxwell, to pair *Rooms* with Limón's 1956 *There Is a Time*. Sokolow's work probes isolation; Limón's hymns community. *Rooms* shows us the invisible, imprisoning structures of an alienated society; *There Is a Time* creates imaginative—even exhilarated—architecture with human bodies. Whether the performers are linking hands to form chains and arches or standing in a circle, swaying gently side to side (as they do to begin and end the dance), they affirm life as a shared event.

The dance's source is reflected in the title of Norman Dello Joio's score, *Meditations on Ecclesiastes* (heard on tape). It's almost miraculous how Limón (undoubtedly with the assistance of his then artistic adviser, Doris Humphrey) made such biblical decrees as "a time to be born and a time to die" well up out of the group patterns and subside into new ones to suggest an inevitable cycle of life. In "A time to kill," Raphaël Boumaïla's fierce dancing is interrupted by three men who enter to execute him; when the cluster has reassembled and some men have exited, Soto and Logan Kruger have replaced Boumaïla on the floor and one is rocking the other ("A time to heal"). Carol Mullins's lighting (executed by Joshua Rose) is especially fine here.

All the performers have a beautiful understanding of Limón's rich, strong style and the curving gestures that suspend—as in a caught breath—yet acknowledge the pull of the earth. Tall Jonathan Fredrickson—taking huge strides and slapping his body and clapping his hands as the music drops out—makes "A time to speak" into a powerful diatribe. Kathryn Alter leaps like a wild-haired fury in "A time to hate, a time of war." And Belinda McGuire is a joyful, scampering delight in "A time to laugh."

The coming year is full of events in honor of Sokolow's centenary, including the Sokolow Theatre Dance Ensemble's April performances at the Joyce Soho. Some people may feel that classic modern dance, with its high-mindedness and visions of universal humanity, is out of step with today's world. It's their loss.